



THE STATE WORKER

Amid climate change and Trump, CA lawmakers want better labor law enforcement

By William Melhado

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Cal-OSHA, a California agency within the Department of Industrial Relations, is in charge of policing COVID-19 workplace infections. David Middlecamp dmiddlecamp@thetribunenews.com



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For nearly two decades, Laurie Wallace has worked at the Phillips 66 oil refinery in the Los Angeles area, where she has gained extensive experience monitoring the safety of a very dangerous workplace.

“I have one tank that has a five-mile blast radius,” Wallace said outside the Capitol Tuesday.

When Phillips 66 announced the Wilmington plant would be closed at the end of

2025, the first place Wallace looked for a new job was with the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health, which enforces laws that protect workers in the Golden State.

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“I wanted to have a career that made a difference,” she said, speaking outside the Capitol during a press conference organized by a coalition of unions, the California Labor for Climate Jobs, to highlight several pieces of legislation. Wallace said she hopes to put her knowledge of workplace safety to good use.

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Despite Wallace’s nearly 20 years of experience in the field, she doesn’t meet the educational requirements to apply for a job even though there is a critical need for more workplace health and safety inspectors at Cal-OSHA. The department’s understaffing has left [workers unprotected](#), labor advocates say.

But two pieces of legislation focused on improving health, safety and rights of California workers could smooth Wallace’s transition from a process technician operator on an oil rig, to field inspector with Cal-OSHA.

Democratic lawmakers argue these labor bills have become increasingly urgent in the face of hotter and more dangerous working conditions as a result of climate change. Labor groups said California needs to step up its enforcement of labor laws in light of the [Trump administration’s cuts](#) to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration tasked with protecting workers.

An understaffed agency

While lawmakers in the past have passed strong laws to ensure California workplaces are safe, the department tasked with enforcing those laws has been chronically understaffed in recent years.

Garrett Brown, a former special assistant to the Cal-OSHA chief who regularly monitors the department’s vacancy rates, found that over 40% of field inspector positions with the department are vacant, according to the latest staffing data from

According to a [safety report](#) from AFL-CIO, a federation of labor unions, the ratio of inspectors to workers in California is 1 to 107,000. In Oregon, the ratio is 1 to 23,000.

These vacancies have left worker protections crippled, Brown said.

[Assembly Bill 694](#) is one potential solution to those vacancies.

Assemblymember Tina McKinnor's legislation calls on the University of California to study Cal-OSHA's high vacancy rates. The Inglewood Democrat's bill also creates an advisory committee to provide recommendations to the Department of Industrial Relations and the Legislature on how to address those unfilled positions, including suggestions on how to expand the range of people who can apply to these jobs through a career development program.

McKinnor said she hopes the study and a workforce pipeline could minimize the department's understaffing issues.

"We can make all the laws we want. If we don't have anyone to enforce them, it doesn't make a difference," McKinnor said during a Tuesday press conference.

[Senate Bill 513](#), authored by Sen. María Elena Durazo, D-Los Angeles, would allow Wallace to receive documentation of her education and training records from Phillips 66 when she leaves her job at the end of the year.

Wallace said those records could help her secure a good job in a related field where she can use the knowledge she's built up over nearly 20 years — potentially with the state, enforcing workplace protections.

Both bills have broad union support. So far no groups have signed on in opposition.

Raising California's standards

Labor groups are worried about the [status of worker protections](#) under the Trump administration. The encroaching effects of climate change on California workplaces are adding to those concerns.

Over the years, as average temperatures across the world have reached record highs, advocates have petitioned the federal government to enact a national heat standard to prevent heat stroke-related deaths.

On his first day in office, President Donald Trump [paused the addition](#) of new policies to the [government's rule book](#), preventing the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration from adding a proposed standard around workplace heat requirements.

Additionally, the administration plans to close several regional offices of the federal OSHA, according to [Inside Climate News](#).

David Huerta, the president of SEIU California and SEIU-USWW, said the state's labor protections have always been stronger than the federal government.

"We have to make sure that we continue to operate at that higher standard and not let the actions of the administration in Washington, D.C., bring down the standards we've already established," Huerta said after a press conference on the labor legislation.

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